

The Editorial Notebook

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## Why Johnny Isn't Learning French

In the late 1950's, frightened by the Soviet Sputnik and goaded by critics of declining academic standards, educators took a hard look at the persistent American failure to master foreign languages. They concluded that poor timing was part of the problem. They found that teen-age — the traditional starting point — is the worst time to teach a foreign language. Adolescents tend to be self-conscious, afraid of making fools of themselves, and therefore awkward about foreign accents. In contrast, young children love to imitate strange sounds and words; give them a nonsense word and they will repeat it with exuberance and without embarrassment.

On the strength of that theory, aided by Federal money for language laboratories, records and tapes, a program known as Foreign Languages in Elementary Schools (FLES) was born and turned into a national movement. School districts vied with each other in starting FLES programs in third and fourth grades. The prospect of catching kids early and keeping them on the foreign language trail seemed like the millenium to those who had despaired of the unproductive struggles with the "pen-of-my-aunt" approach to lan-

guage lessons. In striving suburbs, parents were inspired to form their own foreign language study groups to keep up with their tots.

What has happened to FLES in the past 20 years? The Modern Language Association put the question to education departments in the 50 states. Of the 23 that responded, 17 reported either that the program died or had lost all vigor. Connecticut, once a pioneer, now gives it "low priority"; Indiana described the program as "almost nonexistent, except for a few gifted children"; New York replied that "conventional FLES began to decline in the mid-1960's"; FLES survives in only one district of Nassau County. Massachusetts seems to have maintained some enthusiasm but the general picture is of a movement run out of steam.

Why? The experts cite a number of reasons. When school budgets are cut, foreign languages tend to become expendable. The back-to-the-basics bandwagon has run roughshod over FLES even though experts believe that foreign language study significantly improves basic English reading

and writing skills. But not all the blame rests on penny-pinchers and know-nothings. The Modern Language Association acknowledges that poor teaching, inadequate support by administrators and fading public interest helped kill FLES. Giving youngsters half an hour of French twice a week doesn't work. Language training must be part of the daily curriculum and assigned to teachers who are fluent and bar English for the duration. Once begun, the language study must be continued through junior high school, high school and college, without the common interruption.

The total approach is said to have been working well in several public schools in Cincinnati where even first graders, along with their regular classroom teachers, spend a day a week with native speakers. Some private schools also cling to the immersion technique. But these are the exceptions. Only a few states require foreign language instruction at any level, and some states have recently enacted "basic education" laws that leave language laboratories to gather dust. memorials to a good idea that fell victim to inertia and ignorance.

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